



Integrating Gender into  
Humanitarian Action:  
*Good Practices  
from Asia-Pacific 4*



**GENDER**  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION  
Asia and the Pacific Working Group



Credit: UN Women Asia and the Pacific

## Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action

Gender inequalities constrain the influence and control that women and girls have over their own lives. Disasters and crises tend to exacerbate pre-existing gender-based discrimination, inequalities, and violence. As a consequence, women and girls are disproportionately impacted before, during, and after disasters. However, in the Asia Pacific region, evidence has shown that women and girls are among the first responders to a crisis and play crucial roles in building resilience of families and communities.

When women are meaningfully engaged and their needs are directly addressed, the following happens:

- Humanitarian action is more effective and efficient;
- Transition to recovery is accelerated; and
- Community wide resilience is enhanced.

Therefore, it is vital to invest in women's and girls' capacity development and leadership potential, and to ensure access to resources and information for women to lead and play a stronger role in humanitarian actions. Local women's groups and networks are the most knowledgeable stakeholders of the specific needs and issues for women in disaster prone and affected areas. If given the opportunities, resources, and decision-making space to influence humanitarian action, women's organizations and networks are able to develop local solutions and responses by consulting and engaging with women and girls to promote their leadership role.

This is the fourth compilation of good practices on integrating gender into humanitarian action in Asia-Pacific, developed on behalf of the IASC Regional Network Working Group on Gender in Humanitarian Action in Asia-Pacific.



Front and back cover photo: Credit: UN Women Bangladesh





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## Women as Drivers of Change in Papua New Guinea

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Joyceanne Bonnie is the Vice-President of the Pinepel Women's group, on a small island of Papua New Guinea. After CARE introduced a project to increase gender equality and women's voice within the community, Joyceanne Bonnie was one of the first people to drive the formation of an island-wide community-led group.

These groups, made up of 20-30 people of equal gender, learned about the fundamental elements of climate change and adaptation and were trained in various conservation farming techniques and nutrition.

"For many years, we have often thought, 'This is a really long drought.' It was only when CARE came to Pinepel that we understood what was happening: climate change," said Joyceanne Bonnie looking at the sky.

As part of the CARE project, Joyceanne Bonnie and other community members learned how to setup an island nursery where members learned mulching and other farming practices to help

keep soil moist for longer. They also learned how to nurture the seedlings needed to create kitchen gardens, personal gardens used to grow food for cooking.

After Joyceanne adopted the practice herself, she stressed how it has made her life better. As she told others of her success, they followed her practice.

"Today, almost everybody has a kitchen garden and uses mulch", she says with a wide smile. "Being in the group has helped me learn so many new things. It has let me help my community, and I see things are improving now."

The community-led groups became a strong mechanism for exchanging experiences, as it emerged that group members advised each other on their experiences using climate-resilient practices. This strong sense of ownership provides a solid foundation for sustained mutual learning within the community.

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*The community-based adaptation project took place between July 2012 and June 2015 in Papua New Guinea's Nissan district on the remote atoll islands of Nissan and Pinepel - home to approximately 7,500 people. The project aimed to support communities by increasing their resilience to climate change through food and nutrition security, while reducing disaster risk and building adaptive capacity.*

**Justine McMahon, CARE International PNG**

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## Small Grants Help Businesses Bounce Back in Nepal

*“As part of the Oxfam Earthquake Response, Emergency Food Security and Vulnerable Livelihood (EFSVL), Sindhupalchowk, Nepal sector designed and implemented a Petty Traders Grants Support Program, allowing beneficiaries to restore their businesses impacted from the earthquake.”*



Credit: Oxfam

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Kanchhi Maya Tamang, 56, is a permanent resident of Helambu-8, a small village in Sindhupalchowk district of Nepal, which was severely affected by the earthquakes in 2015. Because of the earthquake, Kanchhi lost her teashop, which was her means for generating income and supporting her family. Her husband died three months later, compounding her incident

“[The] devastating earthquake of April 25, 2015, swept my happiness by destroying my house and my small hotel business. All the materials and goods I had managed, like furniture and utensils, all got destroyed by the earthquake,” she explained.

Kanchhi did not have the capital to restart her business after it was destroyed. With her daughter married and son in India seeking employment, Kanchhi felt stuck and was very depressed, not knowing how she could move ahead in life.

Thankfully, Kanchhi came across Oxfam’s partner organization and learned about the petty grant support Oxfam was providing. She met the beneficiary criteria and received support

to restart her business. At the start she received NPR 14,000 as a support to start up a business. She opened up a small tea shop where she started selling tea and local snacks. She worked hard and made very good use of the resources she received. As a result, she was eligible for a second installment. Now she has been running business smoothly; she has regained her confidence and has scaled up into a canteen.

In follow-up consultations, Kanchhi Maya said that her typical business in a day is NPR 4,000 – 7,000. She added, “Sometimes, my business goes up to NPR 10,000 when an NGO/INGO orders snacks/ food for their meeting.” She has also started advocating other women to have the confidence to run a business like hers.

Kanchhi continues to use her earnings to expand her business. She has a plan to grow her business and continue to make it better. Now she is happy with her success. She said, “I am happy in running the business. My parents and my daughter are also very happy. I will continue the business and try my best to make it better.”

**Bhawana Subedi, Oxfam**

# PRIORITIES FOR INVESTING IN GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

## Participation Revolution – Promote women's leadership and decision making

- Create new or strengthen existing institutional mechanisms to enhance participation of women and girls who are at most risk of and affected by disasters.



- Establish community monitoring and feedback mechanisms that are accessible to all affected, particularly women and girls.



- Establish information distribution mechanisms that are accessible to women and girls.



- Develop gender checklists and standard operating guidelines for humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction.



## Localization - Engage and prioritize funding and capacity development support to national gender equality machinery, local women's groups, and other local networks and civil society groups as first responders and community resilience builders.

- Invest in capacity development of women's organizations, national and sub-national gender equality machineries.



- Ensure adequate representation of national and sub-national gender equality machinery, groups, and other local networks in national coordination structures.



- Ensure that the IASC Gender Marker<sup>1</sup> and Gender Responsive Budgeting Principles are integrated in the application of the IASC 'localization' marker.



Adapted from "Investing in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for effective Humanitarian Action" Advocacy Brief developed by GiHA, Feb 2017

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/topics/gender/page/iasc-gender-marker>

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# Raising Women's Voices in Vanuatu

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Wendy Tomasi, first responder and leader in the Cyclone Pam response, Vanuatu.

Credit: Jeff Tan, ActionAid

Wendy Tomasi is the Women's Affairs Officer on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu. During Cyclone Pam, Wendy housed 68 people in her small two-room home to shelter them from the storm, many of whom stayed for weeks.

*"When we were warned about the cyclone, the men didn't believe that it would be a big deal. It was the women who pushed communities to prepare. They made sure that food was stored in safe, dry places and ran around telling everyone to take shelter from the storm.*

*"And you know what? Everything I instructed, the men paid attention to. I knew that it was up to me to make the right decisions. And it wasn't just me who was leading and ensuring things were okay during the storm: all of the other women who had taken shelter in my home were instructing their families, too.*

*"In the end, we had 68 people in my little house, huddled together. We were jammed in, we could barely move, there were so many of us."*

On 13 March 2015, Vanuatu was struck by a category 5 cyclone, causing extensive damage to infrastructure and homes across the country. An estimated 166,000 people — 60% of the country's population — were left in need of humanitarian assistance.

Despite many women like Wendy Tomasi being first responders when the cyclone hit, they had limited opportunities to contribute to decision-making at community, provincial, and national levels. Women's voices were seldom heard in the response efforts.



In response to this, ActionAid partnered with the Vanuatu Government and set up Women's Information Centres where women could share their concerns, needs, and requests. ActionAid then shared the information with humanitarian community, government bodies, donors, and the public, to make sure they were addressed in the response. The women's information centers also provided a safe place for women to voice sensitive issues such as domestic violence, rape, and incest, which were referred to relevant services.

Women also informed the next phases of the program by indicating what their long term needs would be and capacity gaps in the response. One key concern was how to keep children in school without an income to pay the fees, so women advocated for the Ministry of Education to waive school fees in affected communities, which was successful.

The centers have now transitioned to women's fora that are led by the women called "Women I TokTok Tugetha" meaning, *women let's talk together*. They serve as safe spaces for women to self-organize, connect and jointly strategize on establishing protection mechanisms, emergency preparedness plans, and links to the humanitarian system.

The experience of ActionAid in the response has highlighted how disasters impact women disproportionately and deepen existing gender inequalities. In times of crisis, women like Wendy Tomasi are often the first to respond, yet when the humanitarian system mobilizes, women's roles are undermined, their voices ignored and their agency not recognized. ActionAid believes that by empowering women to lead, emergencies can be the catalyst for fundamental change for women and their communities.

**Lois Appleby, ActionAid**



Wendy with her children and neighbors' children at her two-room house. During Cyclone Pam, Wendy housed 68 people from the area in her small home, some stayed for weeks.

Credit: Jeff Tan, ActionAid



Credit: Maya Karunaratne (2015)

## *Kajanthini: A Model for Women*

Kajanthini, 35, is a war-widowed mother of two children, living in Sri Lanka. After her husband died in the final moments of conflict in 2009, she was displaced to an IDP camp in Vavuniya. She was only able to resettle in her own village three years later, but when she returned it was unrecognizable, many homes destroyed and covered in bushes. She and other re-settlers had to live in tents for the first week, until they were able to clear their lands and put up temporary huts for their accommodation.

Yet Kajanthini was determined to be self-sufficient and provide for her children. After deciding to participate in community discussions, she was eventually elected as Secretary of the Women's Rural Development Society (WRDS) in PTK and given livelihood assistance by organizations working in the area. Using prior experience, Kajanthini decided to start her own grocery shop. As a single woman, she faced resistance, but persevered and was allocated space by the Pradeshiya Sabha (local government) for her shop at the PTK market.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provided Kajanthini with business planning training through which she was able to improve her techniques in business and bookkeeping. She expressed that as a result of the training she gained valuable skills and the confidence to start making decisions to expand her business in the market. Now, Kajanthini earns an average of LKR 7,000 per day with profits of LKR 900. She is even able to employ a shop assistant to support her. Kajanthini specifically chose to hire a woman who was facing difficulties, so that she could help other women to also be empowered.

Kajanthini is a model for other women who want to become self-sufficient and independent. She made the most out of the assistance she received and the skills she already had to create a sustainable living for her family. Her community involvement and leadership qualities have continued to develop and the initial support from IOM can be seen trickling down, changing the lives of other vulnerable women and community members.

**Maya Karunaratne, IOM**



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# Women Refugees Lead Food Distribution and Management in Bangladesh Refugee Camps

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Fatema Khatun is a single mother of seven living in the government-run Nayapara Refugee Camp in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. She has lived here since she fled from Myanmar.

In 2016, Fatema became part of the Refugee Food Management Committee established by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to improve communication with refugees. She is one of eight women in the committee of 16.

As a committee member, Fatema has benefitted from training sessions organized by WFP about the innovative FoodCard system, gender, and protection. Moreover, Fatema says she feels empowered by having her voice heard, and has changed from being shy and timid to a more outspoken and confident woman.

"I feel excited about the responsibility that WFP has given to me in the Refugee Food Management Committee. Every month I am in charge of delivering the latest information. For example, I let others know what the monthly voucher value is, so they can buy fresh and nutritious food in the food shops," says Fatema.

Fatema plays a crucial role in getting food and nutrition related information out to refugees, letting them know not just the monthly voucher value of the FoodCard, but also what food is available in the shops, and what the shop opening hours are. She also helps ensure priority is given to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and



Credit: World Food Programme

people with disabilities during food distributions. Another one of her important tasks is bringing the concerns of her community to WFP and other relevant organizations that work in the camps.

Additionally, when the camps saw an influx of people fleeing from North Rakhine State in Myanmar in late 2016 and early 2017, Fatema took a proactive role to inform them about critical locations and facilities where they could get support. Fatema also displayed her leadership skills when she guided WFP staff during a vulnerability profiling exercise, helping them to identify the people in most urgent need of assistance in and around the Nayapara camp area.

In the future, Fatema aspires to find a job so she can educate her eldest daughter, Samida, and other children up to secondary school level.

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*The WFP FoodCard is an electronic smartcard used to deliver food assistance to 34,000 registered refugees living in the two government-managed refugee camps in Cox's Bazar district. With FoodCard, refugees can purchase 18 different food items in local shops, according to their families' needs and preferences. All the principle cardholders are female.*

**Mohammad Mohiuddin, World Food Programme**

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# Civil Society Organizations Band Together for Gender Equality in Nepal

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Credit: Beyond Beijing Committee (BBC)- Nepal

Within a few days after the devastating 25 April 2015 earthquake in Nepal, a leading network of eight major civil society organizations working on gender equality issues across Nepal came together, and with the support of UN Women, issued a Common Charter of Demands for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in the Post-Disaster Humanitarian Response. This group later called themselves the Women Friendly Disaster Management (WFDM) Core Group.

THE WFDM Core Group made phenomenal achievements in the post-earthquake response and as agents of change to build community resilience and build back better for disaster risk reduction and preparedness as part of the recovery and reconstruction of Nepal. These feats were accomplished by establishing and providing immediate and protective services

through UN Women-supported multi-purpose women's centers in the most earthquake-affected districts, conducting awareness campaigns among women and wider communities, participating in post-disaster needs assessment, and engaging with the Nepal government on recovery, reconstruction, and disaster-risk reduction plans/policies.

Through the National Information Commission, the WFDM Core Group engaged in a dialogue forum with key government institutions, and discussed issues related to equal access and post-disaster relief and services. Various sensitization interventions have also been carried out by the WFDM Core Group to widen the critical mass to address women's demands during disaster response, recovery, preparedness, and overall disaster risk reduction.

In addition, the WFDM core group in conjunction with other organizations, organized a national conference on gender responsive disaster management in Nepal which led to the development of the “Kathmandu Declaration on Gender-Responsive Disaster Management.” Currently, the group is advocating for the coordination of South Asia regional level consultations, the purpose of which is to share/learn about incorporating gender equality and women’s empowerment issues in disaster risk

reduction and preparedness among civil society organizations and National Disaster Management Authorities (NDMOs) in South Asia.

The WFDM is comprised of the following civil society organizations: Beyond Beijing Committee (BBC), Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Home Net South Asia (HNSA), Jagaran Nepal (JN), Media Advocacy Group (MAG), SAATHI, and Women for Human Rights (WHR).

***Sama Shrestha and Sharu Shrestha, UN Women***



Credit: Beyond Beijing Committee (BBC)- Nepal





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